

# **THE EFFECT OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING ON IMPROVING COLLEGE STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION**

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PEREIRA  
2013**

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"A teacher who is attempting to teach, without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn, is hammering on a cold iron." - Horace Mann (1796-1859)

### **SUMMARY**

One of the major challenges for learners and instructors is to find the way of improving reading comprehension achievements. Fortunately, cooperative learning is a method through which this can be implemented and improved, since it encourages students to work in small team groups with different level of ability, where they help each other, they are responsible for their learning as well as the teammates learning, and work on an assignment until all member successfully understand and complete it. Also, this method permit students to acquire more language and social skills that others whom studying the same content under individualistic classroom condition will never reach. Beside, it maximize opportunities for authentic and communicate language, it enriches the language, the interaction among companions and it increase opportunity to individualize instruction.

Reading plays and important role as well, it count for a big proportion in English language. What mean, that when we join both cooperative learning and reading comprehension it is beneficial to learners' achievement. Students are encouraged to perform in their own way without worrying about social evaluation, anxiety is relieved, motivation arises and there are willing to participate. Moreover, tasks should be chosen carefully and be divided in three stages: Pre-reading: looking up unknown words to find difficult points knowledge of the topics. While reading: familiarize with the content and structure of the text. Skimming and scanning. Post-reading: opportunity to relate what they have read, feel or know. These steps will provide platform for cooperative learning and strengthen what student have learned in class.

And finally, the teacher should be a support for learners, encourage them to use reading strategies, to read on their own, provide materials and guidance to carry out the text.

As we are part of an English language program and in a future we will become in-service English teachers, reading is an essential component which should be tackled, because it is what allows learners to interact with what they are reading in a meaningful way. According to Harmer (1998), “ any exposure to English is a good thing, reading provide students understanding more and less in terms of English writing ... they can study the language grammar, production and construction of sentence, punctuation, paragraph and text”. Reading is the complement that enriches other skills, build learners speaking ability, stimulate their discussion and help them to understand words meaning and arguments.

Through reading we get fluency. This fluency helps to avoid decoding words which sometimes take up a lot of our time and make we lose the main idea of the text, divert our attention, visualization, or processing speed. Reading keeps us active, to success in it we must understand the words, meaning, see the images through each word, get the sense of the argument, and take a position toward the text. If we do not do so, the text will be forgotten quickly and nothing will be retained (Harmer 1998).

Basing on the article I will be addressing some aspects I consider relevant for a teacher to have into account to create a good learning environment. These same aspects could be the reason why our classes are not what we expect, they are the following:

### **“Tasks should develop learners reading skills rather than test their comprehension”**

My point of view is that as teacher and learners as well we have suffered with this problem. We have been challenged and also challenged those who have the opportunity to receive our guidance. Why? Because we frequently base our reading activities in merely comprehension without introducing, previewing, or contextualizing the topic. The consequence of this action is that at the end of the lesson learners are lost; there are lots of interrogations, misunderstanding, confusion and gaps in the process of learning the foreign language.

Introducing pedagogical tasks in the process of learning a second language is relevant because with this type of activities the learners will be able to comprehend, manipulate, produce and interact in the target language (Nunan, 2004). So, when preparing an activity for our students we should make sure it is well structured, presented step by step, and organize in a sequence which permits

the learners to build the bridge from passive to active reading, from letters and words to characters and context.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) argues that “learners language learning depend on the immersing in tasks that require them to negotiate, meaning and engage in naturalistic and meaningful communication”. By creating activities that are compound of specific elements, learners will pay more attention to the activity, since they have to focus on the sequence of the content, interact and this automatically engage them and carry them to apply it to their daily routines or in the classroom.

### **Cooperative learning**

As I mentioned before, activities become a bit confused in occasions because we do not contextualize the topics before starting to work deeply. Besides, when developing activities specially reading we tend to ask the students to do it individually. This happened for many reasons but the most common one is to keep discipline under control and avoid talking or disorder among the students. Is time to change this thinking! Working in groups is a powerful element to acquire reading skills. According to Johnson & Johnson (1991), “cooperative learning engage students in their learning process, provide safe, intimate atmosphere and space where students can practice new skills. Each team member contribution is valuable and necessary in order to achieve the goals”.

Johnson & Johnson (1991) also recommended techniques to implement cooperative learning in the classroom such as:

Turn taking neighbor: explain their companions beside the idea of the topic, make questions, etc.

Jigsaw: read a lesson and teach what they learnt.

Pre- and post-group activity: before a new lesson make a brainstorming and write what you know about the topic.

Homework checkers: work in teams to compare homework.

Book report pairs: interview each other in pairs about a book or story.

Writing response teams: read and view partners' paper and make comments.

These manners of working on reading represent a new, fresh and different way which will contribute and also help us in our process of teaching. Besides, it might increase learners' motivation, participation and interest.

On the other hand, we sometimes find ourselves teaching in public schools where the learners have been taught English classes two hours per week. This means that the process will be more complicate for them. So, what about implementing L1 use to brainstorm a new topic and also give them a space to organize those ideas, ideas that will have to be express in L2? Nation (2009), suggest that having students discussing the tasks in L1 before starting the activity helps them to gain understanding about the content of the task before performing. Also, he said that the use of L1 before the activity helps learners to get the relevant aspects and vocabulary in a very supportive way.

Working cooperatively and using L1 for reading comprehension activities in my opinion might give the learners huge advantages to create strong arguments. Harmer (2008) states that when working in groups, learners work on their own speech, they have their thinking time and they become individuals. Another manner of getting learners gathered to work collaboratively is through study groups, here students must contribute, listen to each other, one student speak at the time, everyone should prepare for the task before the session, criticisms should be constructive in order to strengthen weaknesses, learners can ask for assessment in case of doubts, etc.

For example Dr. Mangrum and Dr. Strickchart (2011) mention some benefits for these type of group which are: encouragement of their companion when they feel low motivated because you can ask for assessment with more confidence since the group is smaller and it may generate a more comfortable environment, enable each person to be well prepared for each session since others are depending on your presentation, the activity of debate gives the students more strength and experience, it gives you more ideas that you could not even imagine, It facilitates the process of acquiring new studying styles, so you can compare ideas in order to clarify doubts. Finally, you can “reinforce mastery of information and concepts”. “Cooperative language learning seeks to develop learners’ critical thinking skills which are seen as central to learn of any sort” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

### **Teachers’ role**

According to Richards & Rodgers (2001), the responsibility of a teacher is “to organize the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activity”. Unfortunately, this happens once in our classes. It is common to see students sitting in their chairs like robots who only obey commands. Is like the time is running and we are staying behind in it.

Teachers should encourage the students and prepare meaningful materials to improve communication in real context. This generates real view of the content and implements the use of it in their daily life. As Richards & Rodgers (2001) explains, the teacher role is to select and adapt tasks according to learners needs interest and language skills levels. Facilitate the learners' accomplishment and "employ variety of forms focusing in techniques, including text exploration and guided exposure to parallel tasks". In other word, more than a teacher we should become into facilitators who strengthen learners' process, we should be the ones who control their direction and pace learning, we should monitor and correct the learners' performance instead of being all of the time writing on the board things that aren't useful for real life context. We should stop pretending that we know everything and take advantage of our learners' experiences and knowledge. Working together we can come up with incredible things and learn from each other. Teacher should be a counselor as well, exemplifying an effective communication through paraphrase, confirmation and feedback (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Teacher and learners relationship should be emphasizing on freedom. Where learners can relax to learn, where the environment generates confident in order to speak without any worries, where inspiration to argue about any topic that is been study can grow with the intervention of each member, where all together as one receive input from their partners, where doubts can be clarify and where no one is judge, or criticized. Moreover, as facilitators we have to respect our learners, appreciate every single effort they make to contribute in the activity, no matter if they do not know enough, if they do not have the vocabulary to bring up the best argument. Any step a learner makes should be prize; this will help us to get an environment of trust, we will see clearly what is going on in our learners mind from their perspective and we will be able to understand their position instead of judging them.

And finally because of the teacher-centered scenario which is still use in our classes we create:

### **Passive student**

In my childhood I studied at a college of nuns where you moved if you where asked to and breathe if you where asked to. And until today it is still happening in our classes. It is sad to see learners writing, reading, following instructions and doing just for a grade unique and exclusively when they are asked to. Learners are

not willing to work, participate, take risk because of the fact that we are not encourage them to do so, and we are not exposing them realistic activities.

Today's English classes are a mixture of stimulus-responses mechanism, repetitive practices, commands and no control over content, students are just little robots who move when we push their buttons. As future language teachers we must promote cooperative learning. Richards & Rodgers (2001), states that "teachers should work as facilitators, they must move around the class helping students and groups as needs arise". Besides, "during activities teachers should be monitoring, encouraging and suppressing the inclination to supply gaps ... gaps that should be note to assist groups in self-correction". We have to finish with this English teaching style, it is time to move on and take into our lessons planning new alternatives to form independents and confident learners who in a future can be able to reach a likeable and understandable English language level.

Our students can be more reflective, this will facilitate the way they feel, think and learn. According to Today's collegians self knowledge (2005) when students are reflective is easier to get them engage doing something, and they can learn in a best way, they think quickly and reflect instead of improvising. So, if we want to have reflective students in our classroom we have to change our activities, implement more interactive classes and encourage students to take risk and participate actively.

To conclude, it is important to reflect on the way our classes are developing, we can not pretend to continue basing on methods that are not useful for the learners process of learning. If we take into account the points I mentioned above, we will see successful result of the job we have done. The task, learners working cooperatively, the teacher as a facilitator and an active learner are essential components that working together can reach a great language level, only if we make the effort and transform the way we teach, not as a teacher-centered but as counselor who are willing to fulfill learners needs and improve their interactive drills.

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